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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: SENATOR FEINGOLD DISCUSSES DEMOCRATIC

REFORM, SOMALIA WITH OPPOSITION LEADERS

REF: ADDIS ABABA 03115

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Opposition parliamentarians told visiting U.S. Senator Feingold that they are still waiting for the GoE to address key democratic reforms during the ongoing inter-party dialogue. Opposition leaders bemoaned the divide that has grown between their parties in Ethiopia and former diaspora supporters abroad, resulting largely from their decision to join parliament last year. Opposition leaders explained their disagreement with the GoE's strategy in Somalia; the previous day, most voted to oppose authorizing military intervention. Their primary fears are a politically divided Ethiopia getting stuck in an un-winnable war and incorrect reference to Ethiopian domestic insurgencies involvement in Somalia. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On December 1, during a three-day visit to Ethiopia, Sen. Russ Feingold, accompanied by Senate staffers Grey Frandsen and Evan Gottesman, met with opposition parliamentary leaders. Parliamentarians present during the meeting were: Lidetu Ayalew, United Ethiopian Democratic Party) Medhin (UEDP-Medhin); Dr. Merera Gudina and Beyene Petros, United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF); Temesgen Zewdie and Ayele Chamisso, Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP). Ambassador Yamamoto, DCM, P/E Counselor, PAO and Poloff (notetaker) also accompanied the Senator.

DEMOCRACY, THE DIASPORA AND ETHNIC FEDERALISM

¶3. (SBU) Sen. Feingold asked parliamentarians about their views on the state of democratic reform in Ethiopia and progress since the start of the inter-party dialogue. Responses varied on this issue, but most agreed that the GoE has a long way to go before Ethiopia could be considered a fully functioning democracy with a relevant opposition. Dr. Beyene Petros pointed out that even though the opposition had made large gains in terms of numbers in the 2005 elections (from 12 opposition parliamentarians to 174), the opposition now has less opportunity to voice opinion in parliament. On

this point, Dr. Merera Gudina remarked that during the parliamentary debate following the recent submission of the Independent Inquiry report, the opposition was collectively given only 28 minutes of speaking time. Dr. Beyene added that one significant accomplishment since the election is that the opposition is in dialogue with the government on important matters such as media law and the National Election Board (NEB), but that even in this area they are still waiting for action on the part of the ruling party.

¶4. (SBU) In discussing the role that the Ethiopian diaspora plays in domestic politics, opposition leaders all agreed that serious tension exists and that the relationship is much less constructive than in the past. Dr. Merera said that "a serious rift" exists between his party in Ethiopia and former supporters in the diaspora. Dr. Beyene added, "At this time, nothing good is coming out of the relationship." They explained that the split stemmed largely from a lack of understanding and anger on the part of the diaspora following their decision to ultimately join parliament in October 2005. The two sides are further divided by power struggles and increasing belligerence on the part of diaspora leaders. Lidetu Ayalew pointed out, "The problem is that those (in the diaspora who are) against us are very powerful, but there is a silent majority that, in fact, sides with us (the opposition in parliament)." All admitted that the flow of funds from the diaspora to support their parties had dried up, hindering their ability to properly function as a party. They said that this is compounded by the fact that their parties do not receive any public funding and very little from local supporters.

¶5. (SBU) Though opposition parties share many criticisms of the GoE, a discussion on ethnic federalism established by the ruling party highlighted a fundamental divide in party policies. The UEDF and Oromo parties generally agree with the principle of ethnic boundaries by which the country has been divided into administrative regions, but that the boundaries "need fine tuning." Dr. Beyene told Sen. Feingold

that in his home region, the Southern Nations and Nationalities Peoples Region (SNNPR), there are over 50 different ethnicities and that merging them into the same region was not ideal. The CUDP and UEDP-Medhin parties (both remnants from under the former CUD umbrella) are opposed to administrative divisions based on ethnicity. Lidetu explained that his party is in support of the principle of federalism, but the division should be based on other aspects such as geography, economic factors, historical bonds and language.

OPPOSITION HAS CONCERNS ON GOE'S SOMALIA STRATEGY

¶6. (SBU) Following a session on November 30 in which parliament passed a resolution authorizing the use of military force in Somalia against the CIC, Sen. Feingold queried opposition leaders on their views on the matter. An unprecedented debate in parliament (reftel) allowed the opposition to voice their opinion; all opposition leaders, with the exception of Lidetu, voted to oppose the proposal advanced by PM Meles. The resolution passed by a 3-to-1 margin, following which, opposition parties publicly expressed their disagreement on the GoE's strategy. The GoE in turn criticized the opposition for not supporting it in countering a threat at its border.

¶7. (SBU) In explaining his opposition, Dr. Beyene told Sen. Feingold that the PM's resolution is "overreaching" and that he fears that Ethiopia "will get itself into a war that it can't get out of." He also shared his concern that the PM is leading Ethiopia into a war that will divide the country and warned that many Ethiopians do not support intervention. Dr. Merera raised another general opposition concern, criticizing the inclusion of domestic insurgent groups, including the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), in the resolution's language. He

labeled this "unjust" and said that the PM was using the resolution against domestic opposition for fear that it has the potential to bring down the EPRDF government. He also added that all of those in the CIC are not necessarily "bad people," rather, "it is 10 or 15 percent that are the problem." Temesgen Zewdie (CUDP) questioned whether Ethiopia is capable of an extended confrontation with a foe like the CIC, pointing out that "a conventional war may not be the best way to fight an unconventional enemy." He also told Sen. Feingold that an "information gap" exists regarding between the opposition and the ruling party, claiming that that opposition leaders get most of their information on the issue from the media. Lidetu, the only opposition leader to support the resolution, said that while the government should attempt to exhaust all peaceful means to resolve the conflict, Ethiopia is right to defend its borders if threatened. He cited the recent UN report identifying assistance that the CIC is receiving from several foreign countries, including Eritrea. Lidetu said that, given this interference by countries hostile to Ethiopia, as well as the public declaration of jihad and the CIC's interest in acquiring former Somali lands in Ethiopia, it is appropriate that the GoE act to protect itself.

18. (U) Sen. Feingold did not have the opportunity to clear on this message.

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